Second Honeymoon

Joanna Trollope

Published by Bloomsbury

Extract

First published 2006

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 36 Soho Square,
London W1D 3QY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7475 8063 4
ISBN-13 9780747580638

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All papers used by Bloomsbury Publishing are natural,
recyclable products made from wood grown in well-managed
forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the
environmental regulations of the country of origin.

CHAPTER ONE

Edie put her hand out, took a breath and slowly, slowly pushed open his bedroom door. The room inside looked as if he had never left it. The bed was unmade, the curtains half drawn, the carpet almost invisible under trails of clothing. There were single trainers on shelves, mugs and cereal bowls on the floor, scatterings of papers and books everywhere. On the walls the same posters hung haphazardly from nuggets of blue gum: a Shakespeare play from a long-ago school outing, Kate Moss in a mackintosh, the Stereophonics from a concert at Earls Court. It looked, at first glance, as it had looked for a large part of his twenty-two years. It looked as if he was coming back, any minute.

Edie stepped through the chaos on the floor – ah, that's where her only bone-china mug had got to – and pulled the curtains fully apart. One side, obviously accustomed to doing this, rushed headlong to the left and slid triumphantly off the pole to the floor. Edie looked up. The finial that stopped the end was missing. It had probably been missing for months, years, and Ben's solution had been simply, pragmatically really, not to touch the curtain. In fact, on reflection, he would have had to thread the curtain back on to the pole just once, when the finial first fell off, and this small sign of enterprise and efficiency on his part made Edie think that she might cry. She picked up the fallen curtain and held it hard against her, swallowing against the crying.

'He hasn't gone to Mongolia,' Russell had almost shouted at her that morning. 'He hasn't *died*. He's gone to Walthamstow.'

Edie had said nothing. She had gone on jabbing at a hermetically sealed packet of coffee with the wrong kind of knife and said nothing.

'End of a tube line,' Russell said unnecessarily. 'That's all. Walthamstow.'

Edie flung the coffee and the knife into the sink. She would not look at Russell, she would not speak. She hated him when he was like this, when he knew perfectly well what was the matter and refused to admit it. She didn't hate his attitude, she told herself: she hated *him*.

'Sorry,' Russell said.

Edie pulled the curtain up now and covered her face with it. It smelled of dust, years and years of grimy London dust, silting in through the window frames like the fine tilth from a tea bag. She hadn't acknowledged Russell's 'Sorry'. She hadn't looked at him. She had remained silent, distanced by emotion, until she heard him go out of the room and down the hallway – fumble, fumble by the coat rack – and out through the front door, letting it crash behind him the way they all had, two parents, three children, for close on twenty years. Twenty years. Almost all Ben's lifetime, almost a third of hers. You come to a house, Edie thought, pressing the dusty curtain against her eye sockets, carrying almost more life, more people, than you can manage. And then, over time, almost everything you have carried in begins to leak out again, inexorably, and you are left clutching fallen curtains at ten o'clock on a Saturday morning instead of applying yourself, with all your new reserves of no longer required maternal energy, to quality leisure.

She dropped the curtain back on to the floor. If she turned, slowly, and half closed her eyes, she could persuade herself that Ben had left his room in a mess as a signal to her that he hadn't really left it. That this notion of his to put all the essentials of his life into a duffel bag and carry it off to live

with Naomi, in a spare room in her mother's flat in Walthamstow, was in truth no more than a notion. That he would begin to miss things, his childhood home, the cat, his pillow, his mother, and would see that life was not to be lived so satisfactorily anywhere else. But if she made herself open her eyes wide, really wide, and looked at the calibre of things he had left, the outgrown garments, the broken shoes, the discarded or irrelevant books and discs and papers, she could see that what Ben had left behind was what he didn't want any more. He had taken what represented the present and the future, and he had left the past, leaving it in such a way as to emphasise its irrelevance to him. Edie bent down and began, without method or enthusiasm, to pick up the cereal bowls.

It wasn't as if Ben had ever, really, been away from home. His school days had melted comfortably into his college days and then into irregular, haphazard days of assistant to a self-employed photographer who specialised in portraits. All through these years Ben had come home, more nights than not, to sleep in the bedroom across the landing from his parents' bedroom, which had been allotted to him when he was two. His bedroom had been by turns pale yellow, purple, papered with aeroplanes, and almost black. The detritus of his life, from *Thomas the Tank Engine* to trailing computer cables, had spilled out of his room and across the landing, symbols of his changing taste, his changing world. The thought of the order – no, not order, the absence of chaos – that might follow his departure for Walthamstow brought Edie close to panic. It was like – like having an artery shut off, a light extinguished. It was far, far worse than when Matt had gone. Or Rosa. It was far, far worse than she expected.

She began to pile mugs and bowls without method on Ben's table. He had done homework at that table, made models, hacked with blades at the edges. She sat down by it, on the chair with the broken cane seat, filled in by a gaudy Indian cushion embroidered with mirrors. She looked at the

mess on the table. Ben was her youngest, her last. When the others went, she had felt a pang, but there had always been Ben, there had always been the untidy, demanding, gratifying, living proof that she was doing what she was meant to do, that she was doing something no one else could do. And, if Ben wasn't there to confirm her proper perception of herself in that way, what was she going to do about the future? What was she going to do about herself?

'It's awful,' her sister Vivien had said on the telephone. 'It's just awful. You spend all these years and years developing this great supporting muscle for your children and then they just whip round, don't they, and hack it through.' She'd paused, and then she'd said, in a cooler tone, 'Actually, it's not so bad for you because you've always got the theatre.'

'I haven't,' Edie said, 'I –'

'Well, I know you aren't working at this precise moment. But you always *could* be, couldn't you? You're always going for auditions and things.'

'That,' Edie said, her voice rising, 'has nothing to do with Ben going, nothing to do with *motherhood*.'

There was another pause and then Vivien said, in the slightly victim voice Edie had known since their childhoods, 'Eliot's gone too, Edie. And he's my only child. He's all I've got.'

Eliot had gone to Australia. He had found a job on a local radio station in Cairns, and within six months had a flat and a girlfriend there. Ben had gone five stops up the Victoria line to Walthamstow.

'OK,' Edie said to Vivien, conceding.

'I do know –'

'Yes.'

'Lovely,' Vivien said, 'for Russell.'

'Mmm.'

'Having you back –'

Edie felt a flash of temper. Eliot's father, Max, had drifted in and out of his wife and son's life in a way that made sure

that the only thing about him that was predictable was his unreliability. Vivien might be able to trump her over the pain caused by distances, but she wasn't going to trump her over the pain caused by husbands.

'Enough,' Edie said, and put the telephone down.

'Enough,' she said to herself now, her elbows on Ben's table. She twisted round. Against the wall, Ben's bed stood exactly as he had left it, the duvet slewed towards the floor, the pillow dented, a magazine here, a pair of underpants there. It was tempting, she thought, holding hard to the chairback as an anchor, to spring up and fling herself down on Ben's bed and push her face into his pillow and breathe and breathe. It was very tempting.

Downstairs the front door crashed again. She heard Russell's feet on the tiles of the hall, heard him say something companionable to the cat.

'Edie?'

She went on staring at Ben's pillows.

'I've got the newspapers,' Russell called. 'An orgy of them –'

Edie looked up at Ben's bookshelves, at the space at the end where his teddy bear always sat, wearing Russell's old school tie from over forty years ago. The bear had gone. She stood up, holding an awkward stack of crockery.

'Coming,' she said.

The garden was one of the reasons they had bought the house twenty years ago. It was only the width of the house, but it was seventy-five feet long, long enough for Matt, then eight, to kick a ball in. It also had a shed. Russell had loved the idea of a shed, the idea of paraffin heaters and fingerless gloves and listening to the football results on an old battery-operated radio. He saw seclusion in that shed, somewhere set apart from his family life and his working life because both were, by their very nature, all talk. He had a vision of being in the shed on winter weekend afternoons, probably

wrapped in a sleeping bag, and looking back down the garden to the house, a dark shape with lit windows, and knowing that all that life and clamour was there for him to step back into, when he chose. It was a very luxurious vision, in that it encompassed both privacy and participation, and he clung to it during the years while the shed filled up with bikes and paint tins and broken garden chairs, leaving no space for him. It was even called 'Dad's shed'.

This Saturday afternoon, he told Edie, he was going to clear it out.

'Why?'

'Because it's full of useless junk.'

She was chopping things, making one of her highly coloured, rough-hewn salads.

'And then?'

'Then what?'

'When you have cleared out the shed, what will you do with it?'

'Use it.'

Edie threw a handful of tomato pieces into the salad bowl.

'What for?'

Russell considered saying for reading pornography in, and decided against it.

He said, 'The purpose will become plain as I clear it.'

Edie picked up a yellow pepper. She had gathered her hair on top of her head and secured it with a purple plastic comb. She looked, in some ways, about thirty. She also looked small and defiant.

'You were clearing Ben's room this morning,' Russell said gently.

'No,' Edie said.

He went over to the fridge and took out a bottle of Belgian beer. The boys would drink it straight out of the bottle. Russell went across the kitchen, behind Edie, to the cupboard where the glasses were kept.

He said, his back to her, 'What were you doing then?'

'Nothing,' Edie said. 'Thinking.'

Russell took a glass out of the cupboard.

He said, his back still turned, holding the glass and the bottle, 'They just do grow up. It's what happens.'

'Yes,' Edie said.

'It's what's *meant* to happen.'

'Yes.'

Russell turned. He put down the glass and the bottle and came to stand behind her.

'He's doing what he wants to do.'

Edie sliced through the pepper.

'I know.'

'You can't –'

'I know!' Edie shouted. She flung the knife across the table.

Russell moved to retrieve it. He held it out to her.

'Stop chucking things. It's so childish.'

Edie took the knife and laid it down on the chopping board with elaborate care. Then she leaned on her hands and looked down into her salad.

'I love Ben as much as you do,' Russell said. 'But he's twenty-two. He's a man. When I –'

'Please don't,' Edie said.

'I met you when I was twenty-two.'

'Twenty-three.'

'All right, then. Twenty-three. And you were twenty-one.'

'Just,' Edie said.

'I seem to remember us thinking we were quite old enough to get married.'

Edie straightened up and folded her arms.

'We'd left home. We wanted to leave home. I left home at seventeen.'

'Ben didn't.'

'He liked it here, he loved it –'

'And now he loves Naomi.'

Edie gave a little snort.

Russell went back to his beer.

He said, pouring it, 'This happens to everyone. Everyone with children. It started with Matt, remember. Matt left at twenty-two.'

Edie moved away from the table and leaned instead against the sink, staring out into the garden.

'You just don't think,' she said, 'that it's going to end.'

'God!' Russell said. He tried a little yelp of laughter. 'End! Does parenthood ever, *ever* end?'

Edie turned round and looked at the table.

'If you want any lunch,' she said, 'you finish that.'

'OK.'

'I'm going out.'

'Are you? Where are you going?'

'A film maybe. Sit in a café. Buy a forty-watt light bulb.'

'Edie –'

She began to walk towards the door to the hall.

'Better practise, hadn't I? For the next chapter?'

Outside the shed, Russell made a pile of things to keep, a pile of things to throw away, and a pile to ask Edie about. He had made a cheese-and-pickle sandwich from the last of the white sliced loaf – there would presumably be no more of those, without Ben around to indulge with them – and had eaten it sitting in a mouldy Lloyd Loom chair that had belonged to his mother, in the pale April sunshine. He would also have added a newspaper or two if the sunshine hadn't been qualified by a sharp breeze blowing intermittently through the gap between the semi-detached houses that backed on to his own. They were much grander houses than his – broad steps to the front doors, generous windows to the floor, gravelled car-parking spaces – in a much grander road, but they faced east, rather than west, so they got the wind before he did, and only early sun.

Edie wasn't back. She had returned briefly to the kitchen, wearing a cast-off denim jacket of Rosa's, and kissed his

cheek. He had wanted to say something, to hold her for a moment, but had decided against it. Instead, he let her bump her face against his, fleetingly, and watched her go. The cat watched her too, from a place on the crowded dresser where he was not supposed to sit, next to the fruit bowl. When the front door slammed, the cat gave Russell a quick glance and then went back to washing. He waited half an hour after Russell went out to the garden and then he came out to see what was happening, stepping fastidiously over the damp grass. As soon as Russell left the Lloyd Loom chair, he leaped into it and sat there, watching, his tail curled trimly round his paws and his expression inscrutable.

He was really Ben's cat. Ben had been the only one of their children who had longed for an animal, who had gone badgering on about everything from a hippo to a hamster until, on his tenth birthday, Russell had gone to a dingy pet shop somewhere in Finsbury Park, and come home with a tabby kitten in a wire basket. Ben called the kitten Arsenal, after his chosen football club, and remained indifferent to the implications of this being inevitably shortened to Arsie. Arsie was now twelve and as cool as a tulip.

'Look,' Russell said to Arsie, 'Rosa's tricycle. She loved that.'

Arsie looked unmoved. Rosa's tricycle, once metallic lilac with a white plastic basket on the front, was now mostly rust.

'Keep or chuck?' Russell said.

Arsie yawned.

'Chuck,' Russell said. 'Chuck, but inform Rosa.'

He crouched and inspected the tricycle. Rosa had stuck stickers everywhere, glitter stickers of cartoon animals and fairies. She had looked sweet on that tricycle, pedalling furiously, straight red hair flapping, the white plastic basket crammed with all the stuffed animals she carried everywhere, lining them up at meals round her place, putting them in a circle round her pillow. Sometimes when he looked at her

now, twenty-six years old and working for a public relations company, he caught a glimpse of the child on the tricycle, like a ghost in a mirror. She had been a turbulent little girl full of noise and purpose. Some of the noise and purpose were still there, but the turbulence had translated itself into something closer to emotional volatility, a propensity to swerve crazily in and out of relationships. At least one had to be thankful that she did swerve out again, particularly in the case of the appalling Josh.

Russell straightened up and looked at the house. Rosa's window was on the top floor, on the left. Since Rosa had left home, they'd had the odd lodger in that room, and in Matt's, next to it: drama students Edie was teaching or impoverished actors she'd once been in repertory with who had small parts in plays in little North London theatres. They were good lodgers on the whole, never awake too early, never short of something to say, and they provided, unconsciously, the perfect excuse to postpone any decision about moving to something smaller. The house might be shabby, in places very shabby, but it was not something Russell could imagine being without. It was, quite simply, a given in his life, in their lives, the result of being left a miraculous small legacy in his twenties, when he and Edie were living in a dank flat, with two children and a baby, above an ironmonger's off the Balls Pond Road.

'Four bedrooms,' Edie had said, whispering as if the house could hear her. 'What'll we ever do with four bedrooms?'

It had been in a terrible state, of course, damp and neglected, with mushrooms up the stairwell and a hole in the roof you could see the stars through. But somehow, then, with Edie enjoying a steady spell of television work, and the agency getting going, the house had seemed to them needy rather than daunting, more theirs, somehow, because it was crying out for rescue. They had no kitchen for a year, no finished bathroom for two, no carpets for five. Matt wore gumboots all his childhood, from the moment he got out of

bed. It was perhaps no surprise that Matt should turn out to be the most orthodox of their children, the one with an electronic diary and polished shoes. When he came home, he was inclined to point out that the crack in the sitting-room ceiling was lengthening, that the smell of damp in the downstairs lavatory was not just a smell, that regular outside painting was a sound investment.

'It's hard,' Russell said, 'for us old bohemians to get worked up about such things.'

'Then listen to me,' Matt said.

He said that often, now. He had started saying it after he left home, and returned, just for occasional meals, with a newly critical eye. 'Listen to me,' he'd say to Edie about a part she was reading for, to Russell about some new direction the agency might take, to Ben about his A-level choices.

'You're so adult,' Edie would say, looking at him fondly. 'I love it.'

She loved it, of course, because she didn't listen to him. She loved it the way she loved his regular haircuts and well-mannered clothes and competence with technology. It was amusing to her, and endearing, to see this well-put-together grown man in her kitchen, explaining to her how to send text messages on her mobile phone, and visualise him, simultaneously, once asleep in his cot or sitting, reading earnestly, on his potty. She could play games like that, Russell thought, because she still had Ben; the security of Ben gave her the licence not to take Matt seriously, not to see his maturity as anything other than sweet play-acting.

If Matt was irritated by her attitude, he gave no sign. He treated her as he had always treated both his parents, as very well-meaning people of whom he was fond and who he needed to take practical care of because they seemed to decline to do it for themselves. It was plain he thought Edie indulged Ben, just as it was plain he thought Rosa indulged herself, but he kept these opinions to their proper place, on the edges of his own rightly preoccupying life. He worked for

a mobile-telephone company, had a girlfriend with a job in the City, and with whom he shared a flat. He was entitled, Russell thought, inspecting a neat stack of broken lampshades and wondering why they had ever been considered worthy of salvage, to say, every so often, and to a family who lived so much more carelessly than he did, 'Listen to me.'

Russell did listen. He might not often take advice, but he listened. He had listened while Matt had explained, at tremendous length one evening in a cramped bar in Covent Garden, that Russell should specialise. Matt described his father's agency, which represented actors who were particularly interested in film and television work, as 'limping along'. Russell, nursing a glass of red wine, had been mildly affronted. After the next glass, he had felt less affronted. After the third glass, Matt's proposal that Russell should specialise in providing actors for advertising voice-over work seemed less alien, less unattractively practical than it had an hour before.

'I know it's not theatre,' Matt had said, 'but it's money.'

'It's *all* about money!' Edie had cried, two hours later, brushing her teeth. 'Isn't it? That's all it's about!'

'Possibly,' Russell said carefully, 'it has to be.'

'It's sordid. It's squalid. Where's the acting in bouncing on sofas?'

'Not bouncing on them. Talking about them.'

Edie spat into the basin.

'Well, if you can *bring* yourself –'

'I rather think I can.'

'Well, just don't ask *me*.'

Russell let a pause fall. He climbed into bed and picked up his book, a biography of Alexander the Great. He put his spectacles on.

'No,' he said. 'No. I rather think I shan't.'

Since 1975, Russell Boyd Associates (there were none) had occupied three attic rooms behind Shaftesbury Avenue. For almost thirty years, Russell had worked in a room that had

undoubtedly once been a maid's bedroom. It had a dormer window and sloping ceilings and was carpeted with the Turkey carpet that had once been in Russell's grandparents' dining room in Hull, now worn to a grey blur of weft cotton threads, garnished here and there with a few brave remaining tufts of red and blue and green. Matt, encouraged by Russell's acceptance of his advice about the agency, then tried to persuade him to modernise the office, to put down a wooden floor and install halogen lights on gleaming metal tracks.

'No,' Russell said.

'But, Dad –'

'I like it. I like it just as it is. So do my clients.'

Matt had kicked at several straining cardboard folders piled like old bolsters against the bookshelves.

'It's awful. It's like your old shed.'

Russell looked now, at his shed. It was half empty, but what remained looked intractable, as if prepared to resist movement. Arsie had left the chair and returned to the house and the sun had sunk behind the houses leaving a raw dankness instead. He glanced down at Rosa's tricycle, on its side in the stack to be discarded.

'Rosa's bike', she had always called it. Not 'mine' but 'Rosa's'.

'Russell!' Edie called.

He raised his head.

She was standing at the corner of the house, where the side door to the kitchen was. She had Arsie in her arms.

'Tea!' Edie shouted.

'Look,' Edie said, 'I'm sorry.'

She had made tea in the big pot with cabbage roses on it. It was extremely vulgar but it had intense associations for Edie, as everything in her life did, everything that reminded her of a place, a person, a happening.

She said, 'I was fed up with you because you wouldn't understand.'

'I do understand,' Russell said.

'Do you?'

He nodded, tensing slightly.

'Then tell me,' Edie demanded. 'Explain what is the matter.'

Russell paused.

Then he said, 'It's the end of a particularly compelling – and urgent – phase of motherhood. And it's very hard to adjust to.'

'I don't want to adjust,' Edie said. She poured tea into the huge cracked blue cups she had found in a junk shop in Scarborough, touring with – what was it? A Priestley play, perhaps.

'I want Ben back,' Edie said.

Russell poured milk into his tea.

'I want him back,' Edie said fiercely. 'I want him back to make me laugh and infuriate me and exploit me and make me feel *necessary*.'

Russell picked up his teacup and held it, cradling it in his palms. The aroma of the tea rose up to him, making him think of his grandmother. She had saved Darjeeling tea for Sundays. 'The champagne of teas,' she said, every time she drank it.

'Are you listening?' Edie said.

'Yes,' he said, 'but you forget I know.'

She leaned forward.

She said, 'How do I make you *mind*?'

'Good question.'

'What?'

He put his cup down.

He said, seriously, not looking at her, 'How do I make *you* mind?'

She stared.

'What?' she said again.

'I've been out there,' Russell said, 'for about three hours. I've been sifting through all sorts of rubbish, things that

mattered once and don't any more. And that's quite painful, knowing things won't come again, knowing things are over for ever.'

'But –'

'Wait,' Russell said, 'just *wait*. Rosa's not going to ride that trike again, Matt's not going to hit with that bat, you're not going to read under that lampshade. That's not comfortable, that's not easy to know, to have to accept. But we have to, because we have no choice. And we also have something left.'

Edie took a long swallow of tea and looked at him over the rim of her cup.

'Yes?'

'You talk about wanting Ben back. You talk about his energy and neediness and that way it makes you feel. Well, just think for a moment about how *I* feel. I didn't marry you in order to have Matt and Rosa and Ben, though I'm thankful we did. I married you because I wanted to be with you, because you somehow make things shine for me, even when you're horrible. You want Ben back. Well, you'll have to deal with that as best you can. And while you're dealing with it, I'll give you something else to think about, something that isn't going to go away. Edie – I want you back. I was here before the children and I'm here now.' He put his cup down with finality. 'And I'm not going away.'